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Poor Toulabi, B.

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Nuclear myths and Atlantic realities

Biejan PoorToulabi

Rejoinder to 'NATO and the American nuclear arsenal'
by Adam Lowther and Paul Schumacher in *Atlantisch
Perspectief* no. 8, 2013.

In the previous issue of *Atlantisch Perspectief*, Adam Lowther and Paul Schumacher expressed worry that cuts to defense budgets would leave the American nuclear force too small and unreliable to be effective, while these nuclear weapons are the cornerstone of the security of NATO and its members. Yet, their arguments are unconvincing. If anything, the United States and its NATO allies will only benefit if the alliance reduces its dependence on nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons and deterrence

The United States' strategic nuclear force and particularly its forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) in Europe are widely credited with deterring Soviet aggression against the United States and its NATO allies during the Cold War. With the relevance of nuclear weapons having come into question after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lowther & Schumacher ask whether the US and NATO can maintain credible deterrence without nuclear weapons.

In short, they contend that conventional weaponry, regardless of the superiority of one's arsenal, cannot replicate the explosive and psychological effect of nuclear weapons. They illustrate this with a reference to the use of the BLU-82 'Daisy Cutter' — the largest conventional bomb in the US arsenal — to intimidate opponents in Afghanistan. Supposedly, the failure of this weapon to deter Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters, to whom they refer as "the weakest of adversaries", is a testament to the continued relevance of nuclear weapons.

Of course, the premise is flawed. That conventional 'mega bombs' do little to deter terrorists and insurgents does not mean that nuclear weapons will. Where would one aim

nuclear weapons at when targeting such adversaries? A nuclear deterrent only deters when vital interests — those pertaining to the survival of the state — are at stake. As Kenneth Waltz argued, "potential attackers are deterred by the knowledge that attacking the vital interests of a country having nuclear weapons may bring the attacker untold losses."¹ The reality is that in coming years, as in recent years, NATO will face threats such as terrorism, insurgency, ethnic and civil strife, and cyber conflict. The theaters of operation are not the territories of NATO members but weak, far-away countries without nuclear weapons, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia. Nuclear weapons serve neither battlefield use nor a deterrent purpose against such adversaries, in such conflicts, and in such locations.

The second argument Lowther & Schumacher bring to the table is that nuclear-armed Russia has never come close to NATO red lines due to the American nuclear umbrella and, presumably, the presence of TNWs on European soil. However, this supposed predatory intent on the part of Russia lacks any basis. Despite Cold War memories, NATO members recognize that Russia has neither the intention nor the ability to invade Europe. If anything, archival evidence from the Cold War shows that Soviet/Warsaw Pact war plans for Europe were defensive and meant to respond to a possible attack by NATO.²



Vividly remembering the horrors of two World Wars, the Soviet leadership was effectively deterred by the prospect of a major conventional war; the presence of nuclear weapons just added to the declining appetite for war.³

There is no reason to believe that modern-day Russia will behave any worse in regards to Europe than the Soviet Union did during the darkest periods of the Cold War. Even if one is convinced that nuclear weapons are still needed to protect Europe from Russian adventurism, the deployment of TNWs on European soil is silly. Neither the current dual-capable aircraft tasked with delivering tactical nukes nor their envisioned replacements are capable of reaching Russia — or other real or imagined enemies, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia or Egypt — without refueling at least once. Even if these aircraft were capable of reaching the borders of a target state, they would still have to get through its air defense before being able to hit the intended targets. When TNWs are removed from European soil, the United States' strategic nuclear weapons, or even those of the United Kingdom or France, can still comfortably fulfill the role of NATO's nuclear deterrent. If a remote nuclear guarantee is good enough for South Korea and Japan, it surely will be good enough for America's European allies.

Nuclear weapons and international stability

Nuclear weapons are widely credited with bringing stability to the international system. The prospect of nuclear Armageddon makes states cautious and dramatically decreases the odds of war, particularly between major powers. Even nuclear pessimists accept the pacifying effects of nuclear weapons as a given, often focusing their critique on safety risks and moral and legal objections.

Lowther & Schumacher celebrate the stabilizing effects of nuclear weapons as well, providing evidence of this by considering data on the number of fatalities caused by conflicts since the year 1600 (see figure 1). They observe that between 1600 and 1945 an average of 1-2 percent of the world's population died from war annually, whereas the percentage dropped to 0.3 percent after the invention of the bomb in 1945. They claim a 90 percent reduction in the number of conflict-related deaths and triumphantly conclude that the presence of nuclear weapons must be the root cause thereof.

Unfortunately, this statement misrepresents the facts. Whereas a 90 percent decrease in fatalities might sound like revolutionary change, it did not happen overnight. Figure

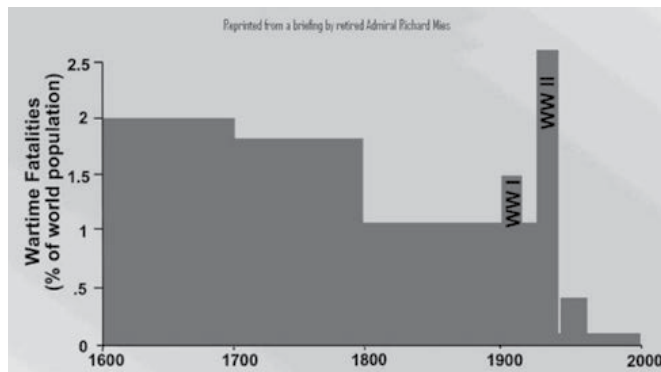


Figure 1



Figure 2

1 clearly shows a declining trend in the number of conflict-related deaths since 1600. Wartime fatalities dropped nearly 50 percent after the 17th and 18th century and dropped another 70 percent after World War II.

We can better understand whether the world has become less conflict-prone by considering more detailed data than the basic figure provided by Lowther & Schumacher. Most of the available conflict data is from the post-1945 period. For our purposes we need to go back further. Peter Brecke's Conflict Catalog allows us to look at the number of conflicts per decade between 1400 and 2000 in Europe, for which the most reliable data is available (see figure 2).⁴ While there is quite a bit of variation in the number of conflicts per decade, a declining trend over the past 600 years is discernible. This does not mean to say that the presence of nuclear weapons has no effect on the way that states behave, but it is not as evident that nuclear weapons are the prime cause of a more stable post-WW II world as is so often assumed.⁵

Do nuclear weapons lead to less conflict?

Considering recent history, it may very well be true that direct conflict between two nuclear-armed powers is unlikely.⁶

During the Cold War the two superpowers and their allies managed to avoid direct confrontation with one another. This however is not to say that nuclear powers do not fight at all. On the contrary, a 2009 study found that states with nuclear weapons are more likely to use force, to engage in militarized disputes, and to be involved in uses of force that result in fatalities.⁷

The same study also found that while all-out war is less likely when both sides have nuclear weapons, nuclear states are much more likely to engage each other in conflicts of lower intensity. Think about it, throughout the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union were involved in numerous proxy wars, causing millions of casualties — the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Afghan-Soviet War, to name but a few.

Finally, the study revealed that full-blown wars and lower-intensity conflicts are more likely to occur between a state that possesses nuclear weapons and a state that does not. The historical record reflects this as there are numerous examples of nuclear and non-nuclear states fighting each other — think of the Chinese fighting American forces in Korea, Egypt and Syria attacking Israel during the Yom Kippur War, the North Vietnamese fighting the United States in Vietnam, and Argentina invading and occupying the British-controlled Falkland Islands.

NATO and nuclear weapons: the next step?

As discussed above, nuclear weapons are not as essential to the security of the Atlantic alliance and its members, or the stability of the world, as conventional wisdom would have us believe. Nonetheless, nuclear weapons still exist in large numbers and it is unlikely that any nuclear state — including those that are part of NATO — will renounce them completely anytime soon. As the risk of the spread of nuclear weapons to new states has remained a key concern over the past two decades, it is of the utmost importance that the United States and its European allies set an example and decrease their own unnecessary reliance on nuclear weapons.

The US nuclear triad

Currently, the United States relies on a nuclear-triad, consisting of three components, namely strategic bombers, land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Following New START (the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the United States and Russia are allowed to deploy 1,550 nuclear warheads on 700 missiles and bombers, with thou-

sands more in reserve. While this number is lower than at any time since the earliest days of the Cold War, it is still far more than is conceivably required for deterrence. The cost of maintaining and upgrading this arsenal and the necessary delivery systems will cost the American taxpayer \$1 trillion over the next thirty years by conservative estimates.⁸

If the current arsenal is overkill, what is a realistic number? Deterrence does not require a state to be able to launch a thousand warheads over the course of half an hour. For stable deterrence it is unnecessary to be able to wipe out half of Russia's population. Even if only a handful of missiles would successfully hit, say, Russia's five largest cities in a retaliatory strike, it would kill millions of people and wipe out a substantial part of Russia's industrial capacity. Given that no state other than Russia has more than 300 strategic nuclear warheads, the United States' arsenal seems excessive in comparison. In a 2010 New York Times op-ed, two Air Force experts argued that the United States could comfortably get by with 311 strategic nuclear weapons.⁹ The authors of a recent Cato Institute study argued that the American nuclear triad is an unnecessary product of bureaucratic competition between the different branches of the armed forces

*A nuclear deterrent
only deters when
vital interests —
survival — are at
stake*

throughout the Cold War — each competing for relevance and a share of the defense budget — aided by an exaggeration of Soviet military capabilities. They contended that replacing the current triad with a submarine-based monad,

the least vulnerable of the three legs of the triad, will save the United States an estimated \$20 billion annually for many years to come whilst leaving deterrence intact.¹⁰

Tactical nuclear weapons in Europe

The most feasible and long overdue step that the United States and its European allies can take is to finally withdraw the roughly 200 B-61 tactical nuclear weapons stationed on European soil. As was discussed above, these weapons serve no military purpose whatsoever, while removing them offers many benefits.

First, there is the matter of the cost of maintaining nuclear weapons in Europe. Currently, the US bears the expenses for producing, transporting, and maintaining the weapons,



including related personnel costs, at an estimated price tag of \$200 million annually for each of the six airbases in Europe. Moreover, the cost of upgrading and extending the life of the B-61 has more than doubled to nearly \$11 billion according to recent Pentagon estimates. At the same time, maintaining forward-deployed TNWs requires European allies to continue investing in expensive dual-capable aircraft and training personnel to conduct hypothetical nuclear missions. The Netherlands and Belgium are slated to replace their current fleet of F-16s with the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. This choice is undoubtedly associated with the F-35's ability to fulfill a nuclear task and the planned modification of the B-61 to fit the aircraft. During this time of unprecedented fiscal austerity and deep cuts in defense expenditures it is irresponsible to continue funding TNWs that add next to nothing to Europe's security, while the money could be spent on systems that are more useful to NATO's current and future tasks.

Second, the withdrawal of TNWs in Europe may convince Russia to start decreasing its own tactical nuclear arsenal. Current US and NATO policy is to make withdrawal contingent on a reduction in the number of Russian TNWs and their removal away from Russia's western borders. Russia, on the other hand, insists that American TNWs first be withdrawn from Europe before having any discussion about Russia's tactical weapons, a demand that goes back to Soviet times. Linking the removal of American weapons to Russian reciprocity is not only strategically redundant (after all deterrence will remain intact after withdrawal) but also displays a disturbing misunderstanding of security dilemma dynamics. It is dangerous to assume that Russian policymakers understand that NATO intentions are defensive and pacific, and subsequently interpret Russia's maintenance of a large (but ultimately useless) number of TNWs near NATO borders as an indication of hostile intent. By removing American weapons from Europe, NATO signals that it is sensitive to Russian security concerns. After all, it is NATO

that retains forward-deployed nuclear weapons on the soil of European non-nuclear weapon states, despite the questionable nature of such an arrangement under the provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), whereas Russia maintains its nuclear weapons within its own borders. Withdrawal removes Russia's reasoning for not wanting to talk about the relocation and reduction of TNWs and creates an atmosphere conducive to negotiating a complete ban on this class of nuclear weapons.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, withdrawal will show that NATO members are serious about their disarmament obligations under Article VI of the NPT and will strengthen the prevailing taboo that rests on the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons. At first sight, the removal of 200 nuclear weapons might seem inconsequential when it comes to stopping the spread of nuclear weapons. But think about the absurdity of, say, the German and Italian foreign ministers lecturing their Iranian counterpart about proliferation when their own countries host nuclear weapons. Maintaining TNWs in Europe sends the message that nuclear weapons have military and political value; one should thus not be surprised if an insecure state were to succumb to the temptation of obtaining them. Of course, the issue of delegitimizing nuclear weapons goes much further than their removal from European soil. In the context of NATO it is also about the continued reliance on strategic nuclear forces as the supreme guarantee of the alliance's security as confirmed in the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept and, more fundamentally, about the retention of any nuclear weapons by their current owners. Nonetheless, the withdrawal of forward-deployed TNWs will serve as a significant gesture to non-nuclear weapon states that have been complaining about a lack of progress on nuclear disarmament.

Conclusion

For far too long we have allowed bogus arguments, questionable data, and fuzzy analogies to cloud our thinking when it comes to the role of nuclear weapons in maintaining the security of the Atlantic alliance. During the Cold War these weapons might have seemed a necessary evil, but with the North-Atlantic region facing new challenges it is time to scale down NATO's reliance on these relics from the Cold War. While complete nuclear disarmament might seem a distant vision, the United States and its NATO allies can take meaningful steps towards disarmament. Instead of spending an arm and a leg on maintaining and upgrading its nuclear triad, the US should make unprecedented cuts in the number of strategic nuclear weapons it has deployed and consider retiring the land and air-based legs

of its triad in favor of a submarine-based monad. Doing so neither affects the invulnerability of its nuclear force nor the ability to conduct retaliatory strikes, while saving as much as \$20 billion annually. More importantly, NATO should withdraw American forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. These weapons are irrelevant to NATO's deterrence task but are a financial burden on the US and the European host nations. Moreover, they continue to play a spoiler role in NATO-Russia disarmament talks and make it unnecessarily difficult for European NATO members to hold other states accountable for violations of their non-proliferation obligations.

Biejan PoorToulabi is a lecturer in International Relations and Security at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, VU University Amsterdam. He is also a board member of Pugwash Netherlands and the Netherlands Atlantic Youth Association.

Would you like to react?

Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

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